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Lin Piao is 'Finished'

MARSHAL LIN PIAO, formerly the anointed heir of Mao Tse-tung, is "finished". Very probably, the chief of staff of the Chinese Communist army, and the commanders of the Air Force and Navy, are "finished" too.

It is not absolutely clear whether "finished" means under the sod physically, or simply dead politically. At any rate, "finished" is the official description of Lin Piao's present condition. And the Communist party cadres all over China are further being told that "Lin Piao and others" are "finished" because they plotted unsuccessfully against beloved Chairman Mao!

All this may appear as lurid and hard to credit as the wildest excesses of Mao's cultural revolution. But the evidence is now overwhelming that the process of briefing the party cadres on the "finish" of Lin Piao began about mid-October. It is still continuing throughout the Chinese provinces.

The word "finish" is here put in quotations because it is the literal—indeed the only possible—translation of the Chinese word used in the briefings. Enough mutually confirmatory reports of the country-wide briefings have now seeped out of China to leave no doubt about the matter.

THE BRIEFINGS were quite certainly ordered to acquaint the lower ranks of the party with the state of affairs at the top. Thus there can be no doubt, either, that this really is the state of affairs. In sum, Lin Piao's hash has been permanently settled, quite possibly by his death.

In the briefings, those described as having plotted against Chairman Mao, and having been "finished" in consequence, are simply "Lin Piao and others". But that word, "others", must be interpreted in the light of the abrupt and total disappearance from the scene of the army's chief of staff, Huang Yung-sheng, and the air force and navy commanders, Wu Fa-hsien and Li Tso-peng.

It is an odds-on bet, in fact, that all three leaders of the Chinese Communist armed services have suffered the same fate as the former heir of Mao. Their

"finish" also appears to be linked with the earlier fall from power of two more of Mao Tse-tung's closest collaborators in the cultural revolution, his sinister personal secretary, Chen Po-ta, and Chen Po-ta's partner in the politburo, Kang Sheng.

You can now construct a logical scenario, indeed, to explain these astonishing developments. The attack on the "May sixteenth group", which mainly meant Chen Po-ta and Kang Sheng, began in the controlled Chinese Communist press last spring.

ONE MAY GUESS that Lin Pao and his allies in the armed services therefore began to ask themselves, "Who comes next?" In consequence, they began to arrange an extraordinary plenum of the party's central committee.

The packed plenum would no doubt have destroyed Chou En-lai. It would have deposed Mao Tse-tung, except perhaps for an honorific role. And it would have given full, immediate power to Lin Piao and the rest. In assembling such a plenum, of course, Wu Fa-hsien's air force would have had to play the key role.

If this scenario is correct, the plotters were caught in the act early in September, when Chou En-lai abruptly began cancelling very important appointments over a period of days. In the resulting confrontation at the summit of the government, the plotters must then have been "finished" by September 12.

After that date, Chou En-lai resumed business as usual, with his particular ally in the armed forces, Marshal Yieh Chien-ying, acting as his partner on such important occasions as the talks with Dr. Henry Kissinger. On September 13, moreover, all Chinese aviation was briefly grounded. All China's military aviation continues to be grounded, furthermore, obviously indicating a thorough purge of the air force.

This is only a scenario, but it explains all the facts except two. The Soviets almost certainly intervened rather clumsily, somewhere

along the line. This is the only reasonable explanation of the attempt to flee to Irkutsk, on one of the Chinese air force's four Trident jet transports, that was made by as yet unidentified high personages on the night of September 12-13. But the exact nature of the Soviet role is still mysterious.

In addition, all Mao's most important partners in the cultural revolution are now "finished", except for Chou En-lai and Mao's wife, Chiang Ching. Except for Chou En-lai, in fact, a clean sweep has been made of the former top leadership under Mao. And this, too, raises obvious questions.

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